## Allegations of assault by guards at a UK detention centre 5 December 2014

The eerie opening scene from a [film](http://vimeo.com/113244678) made by the independent filmmakers [Standoffilms](http://www.standoffilms.com/) and released on Vimeo on the 1st December, shows Campsfield House Immigration Removal Centre (IRC) at night. For a brief moment, the Centre, hidden close to a green belt site near Oxford airport, is strangely beautiful, its towering fences and razor wire backlit by giant floodlights.

The scene is soon disturbed by the tinny static of mobile phone interference. The disembodied voices that we hear over the next five minutes of footage come from detainees inside the Centre, speaking to pro-migrant activists on the 29th November. They are worried about a friend who they say was beaten by guards, “My friend is in critical condition at the moment”, the first man says. ‘ZW’ is the next voice to narrate the fragmented story, “This officer pushed him, the other guy, and he pushed him back as well. And then the manager said to the other four guys, the four officer here, to beat him up. Like five of the detainees saw it, like eye-witness. They put him on the floor and beat him really badly and after that they took him elsewhere”.

The victim has mental health problems and this is the second time that he has been assaulted ‘EO’ says. “I can’t believe that in this country, some of the officer can come and just beat you down, without any reasons, just because you are Asian.” The men want to see their friend to make sure that he is safe. Over footage of detainees walking in the small courtyard, EO says that there are between 50 to 100 men who are ‘resisting’ in protest at the incident.

At a demonstration outside Campsfield on the 3rd December, organised by [The Movement for Justice](http://www.movementforjustice.org/), there was no signs of a protest or of any detainees in the courtyard. When Campsfield managers were asked by the Oxford based group [Asylum Welcome](http://www.asylum-welcome.org/) for comment, the Home Office issued the following [statement](http://www.cherwell.org/news/topstories/2014/12/03/detainees-protest-at-campsfield-house), “We are aware of an incident at Campsfield Immigration Removal Centre on Saturday [November 29th] which resulted in an officer sustaining minor injuries. No detainees were injured and nobody required hospital treatment.” Asylum Welcome recognise that the story of what happened in Campsfield is incomplete but have since been able to establish the wellbeing of the alleged victim. He has been kept in solitary confinement and it is likely that he will be moved to another detention centre.

These most recent events are part of growing concern about the welfare of those who are held in British Immigration Removal Centres that are run by private companies. In 2012, it was found that Rule 35 of the 2001 Detention Centre Rules, which prevents the locking up of victims of torture, was routinely [contravened](http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/may/22/torture-victims-immigration-detention-centres). Poor conditions and allegations of sexual abuse came to light in 2013 in a [report by the Independent Monitoring Board](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-18118155) on Yarl’s Wood Removal Centre in Bedfordshire. The Home Office’s approach to ‘food and fluid refusers’ emerged as a concern in the case of the hunger striker [Isa Muazu,](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-25416580) who was deported just before Christmas last year, even though doctors had advised that he was not fit to fly.

Earlier this year, a [report](http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/jan/16/harmondsworth-elderly-man-died-handcuffs) by HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP), of an unannounced visit to Harmondsworth IRC, in August 2013, highlighted the inhumane treatment of detainees at the Centre. In his introduction to the report, Nick Hardwick, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons writes ‘A major concern is an inadequate focus on the needs of the most vulnerable detainees, including elderly and sick men, those at risk of self harm through food refusal, and other people whose physical or mental health conditions made them potentially unfit for detention.’ (p,5)

The HMIP report included the case of an 84-year-old Canadian citizen, [Alois Dvorzac](http://www.channel4.com/news/left-to-die-in-british-detention-who-was-alois-dvorzac), who was refused entry to the UK in January 2013. Dvorzac was judged to be unfit for detention or deportation after doctors diagnosed him with Alzheimer's disease and recommended social care. Yet, after a brief stay in hospital, Dvorzac was sent back to Harmondsworth and was handcuffed because he was thought to be at risk of absconding. Mr Dvorzac is reported to have been in handcuffs for five hours before he died and was ‘still in handcuffs at the point that he died’ (p.13).

It is through such cases that the tensions and paradoxes in immigration detention as both incarceration and care become most visible. Anti-detention activists draw attention to the imprisoning of migrants - many of who have already faced hardship and sometimes brutality - as institutionalised abuse. Liz Peretz, from [Barbed Wire Britain](https://barbedwirebritain.wordpress.com/about/), told me “Many of our concerns are highlighted in this incident, not only the alleged violence by guards but also a more systemic and discreet violence whereby immigration detainees are being locked up without a time limit and have to live with ongoing insecurity and fear.”

Those such as [Mitie Security](http://www.mitie.com/services/specialist-services/custodial-services/immigration-services) who run Campsfield try their best to portray a different face to immigration detention. Despite deaths, hunger strikes and self-harm in the Centre, Mitie’s mission statement would not look out of place in a hospital or care home, “We pride ourselves on providing detainees with a safe and secure immigration detention environment, which promotes respect and an understanding of cultural differences, as well as safeguarding their wellbeing”. Mitie is now the largest single provider of immigration detention ‘services’ to the Home Office, having won a recent £180 million [contract](http://www.mitie.com/news-centre/regulatory_announcements/2014/1898898) in September 2014, to run both Harmondsworth and Colnbrook IRCs.

At a time of increasing anti-migrant sentiment and anxiety about undocumented migrants, the work of activists to keep immigration detention in the public eye and to counter the dehumanisation of detainees is much needed. Research by Oxford University’s [Migration Observatory](http://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/immigration-detention-uk) in 2013 found that immigration detention facilities in the UK are among the largest in Europe. Yet, we know very little about what happens in these remote and secretive places, where the usual legal safeguards afforded to prisoners are often lacking.

Perhaps we can learn something from the creative efforts and moral injunctions issued by those such as Standoffilms, who are bringing detainees into public and political consciousness and debate? What if we all became a part of a relay for these fragile and disturbing voices, refusing to allow their demands for human recognition to be muffled or silenced? Listen carefully. Can you hear them?

“England, hear our voice!”

“We want freedom!”